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For Sale

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The house Dulcey had wanted to buy but her husband told her they could never afford had a "Moving Sale" sign in the front yard that Saturday morning. The sign was hand-printed with a black marker and staked above a profusion of daphne bushes bursting into bloom. The owners had moved in a year ago, the same month she and Joe had bought their house across the street. The two couples had never spoken, unusual in a neighborhood where doors were kept wide open all summer and far into the fall, and kids migrated in packs from yard to yard. But the couple across the street was older, no kids, so Dulcey wrote off the social obligation. The wife drove a Lexus and was never home anyway. Dulcey spied her early mornings getting into her car, her hair a cap of unusual white over a tan face, everything about her, even the toned toes, enhanced by people you paid to do those things. The husband drove a new jeep, but he mowed the lawn himself and puttered about yanking weeds, sometimes planting flowers from trays he carried from the jeep's back seat. He dug each hole down on his knees with a hand trowel. The way he patted the dirt around the roots reminded Dulcey of the way she changed her baby's diapers, almost covertly, unsure she was doing it right.

Dulcey had decided he was the one who had wanted the house. He had a slight paunch, sad eyes, and was followed everywhere by a fine black lab that reminded Dulcey of her favorite dog when she was a child. A few times the dog wandered across the street to sit beside Dulcey where she perched on the steps, her face to the sun while her babies slept. She ran her hands over the top of the dog's smooth head, remembering random, happy moments from her childhood. After a few minutes, the neighbor whistled. The dog looked up at Dulcey and waited for the second whistle before heaving back up to his feet and trotting across the street. Dulcey would lift her hand and give a wave, and the neighbor would wave as well, saying nothing but not turning away either.

It was weird how he stared, but then she knew she was a mess, sometimes in her pajamas yet, cap jammed on. Who had time to bathe or wash hair with two newborns? She decided maybe he was near-sighted or one of those controlling men like her father, who waited for you to say something intelligent before he chose to respond. She wouldn't do him the favor, she decided. It was the dog she liked. And the house. She'd hug her knees and tip her face up to the house's cupola with its perfect cerulean blue roof and three narrow window frames set with stained glass. The cupola sat like a crown on the top of the sun-kissed yellow home. She claimed that high

round room as her own the first time Joe had driven her down the street to show her the boxy bungalow he had picked out for them.

The entire house, a mansion really, made her mouth water. Each of its many windows was edged in tiny red touches that embossed the exterior like fine embroidery. Surrounding the first floor, like a lace skirt, was a wrap around porch trimmed out with wooden lattice work painted a dazzling white. The house was like a porcelain family heirloom, a teapot or gravy dish carried in a wooden chest across the sea from the old country. It was a home that should be claimed by a sprawling family, passed down from one generation to the next. She felt in her chest the bang of the front screen door whenever the neighbor went in.

"I'm betting foreclosure," Joe said that morning before going to his office to catch up on grading his students' papers. He stood at the bathroom sink naked and shaved even swathes down his cheek. He glared at her in the mirror. "What do two people need a house with five bedrooms for anyway?" he said.

"Well, if they could afford it," she said, then was immediately sorry, because sometimes he leapt on the word "afford" or "budget" or anything similar that came out of her mouth and used it to return to some ongoing speech in his head he had prepared for her about economizing, fiscal responsibility, and a more consistent use of coupons when grocery shopping. She glanced at his buttocks, heavier than when they had married, but still nice looking. She had liked them plenty enough at first, sometimes she still did, but whenever he caught her appraising him he took it as a sign that she wanted to go to bed, and most often she did not.

She was simply considering, she would tell him. Sometimes she was trying to just breathe, especially when the babies were quiet. Wherever her eyes landed she let them, and sometimes it happened to be upon him.

He kept shaving and talking about the neighbors.

"....and since they bought during the height of the mortgage boom."

"So did we," she reminded him. She had wanted to wait to buy a house, one right for them, but he had created a spread sheet to show her how much they would lose over time if they kept renting.

He wiped the remaining lotion off his face, leaving his face pink and glowing. Dulcey knew he had been an impulsive, rosy-cheeked boy who spent half his high school years in detention or the principal's office. He could not have remotely imagined himself one day responsible for a wife and twin daughters or talking the way he did now.

Yes," he said, "which is why we have to watch the funds." He turned to her, put his hands on her shoulders, kissed her. "Once you go back to work and we refinance, we can have a different conversation, maybe add that porch you want to the back of the house."

She strategically backed toward the bathroom door and avoided looking down at his penis, which she could feel against her belly. "The twins," she

said. "I can hear them in the kitchen. I can't remember if I shut the basement door."

He frowned, ran his fingers through his wet hair. "I'm starting to get a complex."

She bumped him once with her shoulder and said, "Don't be silly. What you've got are two little girls who are going to start talking soon. You don't want their first sentence to be, "I saw daddy's naked butt."

"Or worse," he said.

"Or worse."

He went into their bedroom and closed the door to dress. She went to the kitchen and poured cereal into matching Dora the Explorer bowls. When Van Morrison's "On the Bright Side of the Road" came on the CD player, she turned it up. Rich, her old lover, had played all Morrison's albums on his stereo for her the summer she was twenty-four. She remembered that song, how blinding drunk they were listening to it, how they fell going up the steps to his bedroom, got up and fell again. Rich had slid on his back down the staircase, head first, singing off key, his arms clasping her tight. Dulcey lay atop the slope of him, her chest to his as if he were a raft she was riding down a rapids. She had laughed as if had fallen to entertain her, was singing just for her. She realized ten years later and standing in the clutter of her dim kitchen, that those few minutes on the steps with her had been a rare moment of relief for Rich. He had been dogged by deep grief that caught up with him whenever he stood still.

On the way to the refrigerator she began to sway her hips the way she used to for Rich, an overdone sultry twitching. She'd been too young then to know about real seduction, the patience it required, the gratitude both partners should feel.

"Sippy!" screamed Barbara. Dulcey spun away from the kitchen. The sippy cup was on the living room window sill, where the girls liked to line up bears, pacifiers, board books, and candy wrappers. It was a toddler's altar devoted to the big house across the street, which filled the window's view. Ducley whipped herself around, her hands over her chest, did a little side step to the music. There it was, the Dora the Explorer sippy cup on the sill, caught in a blast of sunlight. The red cap burned bright like a candle. She grabbed the cup, rolled her hips, threw her head back, and leapt into a wash of sunlight. The light burned against her cheek and down her chest. Her nightgown was sheer, not warm enough for this time of year. She'd been cold all night, she realized, but the sun made her float. She beat her bare feet on the floor. The girls began to fuss in the kitchen, and she pounded her feet harder, did a spin, looked up.

There was the neighbor on his front sidewalk staring at her, in each hand a straight back chair. She flagged, her nightgown deflating, a sail emptied of wind.

He set the chairs down one on each side of him. They tipped in opposite directions, seemed poised to dash off. Hands on their backs, the neighbor

swayed first right then left on his hips, his feet planted firmly, his shoulders rolling. It was a surprisingly smooth move, the kind she suspected he did in the shower when no one was watching. She put her fingers to her mouth to show she was laughing, but he did not return a smile. Instead he brought his hands together hard; his body shook when his palms met. Through the glass she could hear a sound like a gunshot.

As if a bullet hit her, she threw here arms wide, pitched herself back a step, and twirled like a propeller. She did not dare to look back. While he watched she spun faster and faster. Speed vibrated on the balls of her feet, fueled by what she realized was a confusion so huge she could only dare let herself feel it if she kept on spinning.

When Joe came out of the bathroom, he found her collapsed in a ball on the floor beneath the window, panting and laughing. "Don't you hear those kids?" he asked. "They're crying." His shirt was a beautiful sheet of blue he had ironed himself. He looked so trim, precise and clean, so capable to deal with whatever came, that she hid her face in her hands.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's sunny outside today," she said.

He furrowed his brow. "You are starting to scare me," he said.

When he offered to help her, she pushed him away. "Go take care of the girls."

By the time Joe left she was up and fine, just fine. "It's been a long winter," was all she would say when he left.

After she got dressed, she stood at the window with the twins and watched cars collect along the curb, shoppers trail up the lawn and disappear behind the big house. Should she go? Just for a look? She could avoid the neighbor completely if there was nothing to buy, and it was likely she couldn't afford whatever he was selling. The twins, toddlers with a tendency to want down when they were up and up when they were down, yowled and twisted on her hips like cats caught in a snare. Dulcey carried them out to the front porch of the little two bedroom, one bath Craftsman built in the 1940s, an afterthought on this street as far she could see. She forced the kids into the double wide stroller. The sun was out, but it was still April and the air damp after months of rain. She managed to find only one red mitten out of the set of four she had knit while pregnant and jammed it on Bubba (or Barbara's) sticky hand. That would have to do. Doe Doe (or Delores) would throw hers over the side anyway.

Dulcey marched them across the street. In her back pocket was a twenty dollar bill she had taken out of the cash machine yesterday. She refrained from telling Joe about the withdrawal, even though he would see it when he checked the bank account in the computer at his office.

The neighbor loomed over a card table in the opposite side of the backyard from where she stood. It was as close as she had ever come to him; he looked taller and not so grey. He sat with a notebook and a jar of pens planted in

front of him. Why did he need the whole jar? she thought, irritated. Excess, that's what it was. Like their cars, Joe said, or a house with five bedrooms for a couple with no children. And that they could afford to buy this house, keep it for only one year, and then change their minds and move? It was everything, Joe said, that embarrassed him about America.

Dulcey steered the stroller along the edge of the yard, could feel the man's eyes had fixed on her. The twins gnawed on some stale crackers she found in a plastic bag in the stroller's side pocket. She leaned over a table to avoid the neighbor – it really was rude the way he stared – and found herself confronted with assorted shoeboxes holding jumbles of baby food jars. The lids read stewed carrots or plums or beets, but the jars themselves gleamed with clear or creamy liquids. When she unscrewed one of the lids she caught a whiff of something toxic.

"Rubbing alcohol," a voice behind her said, and there he was. He came to stand beside her.

"Why?" she said. She tried to put the lid back on the jar, but her hands were shaking.

He took first the jar, then the lid, screwed it on tightly, and set the jar back in the box as if she were too small to handle the task. "For crafts," he said. His voice was low and slow, as if it cost him to say even that much.

"What kind?" she asked. She was cheerful, tried to act as if the little dance he'd witnessed had not happened, that it was perfectly normal that they had managed to live across the street from each other an entire year without speaking.

She waited for him to answer.

He didn't.

She turned away to inspect the wide back yard, the items set out in neat rows like a flea market. A dining room table with eight chairs, too big for Dulcey's house by far, was getting a close once over by two women, one in a red wind breaker and the other in a blue one. They were keeping a polite distance from each other, both running their palms over the table surface.

"How much do you think I should ask for that dining set?" he said. His voice was a rumble. She had to pay close attention to hear him.

"How much do you need?" she asked.

He snorted.

She pushed the heavy stroller to the next table, this one stacked with an arrangement of baby clothes. She picked up a pale blue sweater, a small airplane embroidered across the front, tags still on it, and tried to understand.

He stood beside her.

"How much?" she asked.

"I don't have two of those," he said.

He took the sweater from her and placed it back on the table amidst little blue pants, white baby shirts, and a box of footies already too small for her daughters. It was a complete set of clothing for an infant, none of it ever

used. She saw then all of the clothes on the table had never been worn. She brushed her hand over corduroy baby pants, a cashmere pullover, and tiny boy's swimsuit with white draw strings still in a neat, pressed bow.

"How much?" she asked again. It was all she could think to say.

Again he did not answer her.

One of the women at the dining table signaled to him, and he set off across the yard. He had dismissed Dulcey. His back to her stung. She'd imagined he had watched her this whole year thinking there was more to her, some great mystery, capped off with the dance this morning. She guessed now that he'd seen her up close, now that she'd opened her mouth, he assumed she was ordinary and thoughtless. He could turn away. She knew she shouldn't care, but she saw herself the way he did. She had become yet another preoccupied mother in her thirties, out of her element, with no money and no more potential. She yanked the stroller around as fast as she could on the lawn, the cumbersome wheels fighting her.

What she had liked about Rich at first were his shoes. This was after she'd completed four years at a state college and before meeting Joe. Getting her degree in history had seemed to take forever, but after graduation she had wandered around waiting for answers. She learned to bartend and then to make jewelry with two married artists, both hinting they wanted to sleep with her. After that relationship got more complicated, she ended up in a local clinic, her thighs covered with a rash none of her friends wanted to look at or talk about.

Rich walked into the examining room after too brisk knocks. She was bent over, working off her underwear beneath her paper gown. What she saw first was his shoes. Cracked brown boat shoes, the leather ties loose, as if he'd tried and tried to tie them, then gave up. The shoes calmed her. She peered up to the blue jeans, the hem of the white lab coat, sped up over the searing white to his pocket, the requisite felt tip pen, and then finally reached his face. Unshaven, as if he had been running late all day. His eyes were wide and worried. He was older than her father, and he was concerned about her, which struck her as odd, because she had never been in his office before. She'd been referred to him by a friend who said only that he didn't always make you pay.

He said, "Dulcey Major, you have a problem." He put out his hand to shake hers, and she said, "I guess so."

Next point in his favor: He examined her without gloves on, which wasn't so unusual then, but he didn't hesitate. He put the lamp down on her thighs – didn't ask her to lie down, didn't call the pursed lip nurse back in, didn't ask her to put her feet up in the stirrups. He touched her carefully and whistled. "Yow. I'll bet that hurts."

It did. It itched like hell, too.

He sat back, crossed his arms. "Well, I've got good news and better news.'

"It's not VD? Because I kind of deserve to get it"

He laughed, a sharp bark that made her laugh, too. She deserved to be pregnant, too. She had had unprotected sex in the workshop one too many times with the morose jewelry maker. They had not included his wife.

"It's a bad case of ring worm. It's curable. I have some cream around here I can give you. I'd really like to know how you got it there. Are you a swimmer? Maybe an exotic dancer? If so, you need to get that pole sterilized."

She froze but saw he was serious, no judgment, simply doing his job protecting the community's health. She said she had no idea how she got ring worm there, maybe swimming too many hours in the stagnant pool behind the jewelry maker's house. She had to wade into the thigh high muck to get to clear water. Rich suggested she get a blow up raft. He was partial to those himself. He might even have one of those around the clinic, too. He ducked out of the office to look. She'd pulled on her clothes, caught her reflection in the mirror, rolled her eyes and grinned.

A week later she brought him chocolate chip cookies as a thank you because she could not pay, at least not that week. The clinic was closing up for the day. He was headed out the door ahead of his secretary, who waved him out saying, "I can reschedule those appointments. Get a hurry on to catch that flight. Rich, again, I'm sorry for your loss."

He nodded, pulled the door shut behind him. Without his lab coat, he looked less coherent to her, more rumpled. The shoes were the same though. She studied his shoes, the worn leather familiar and comforting. She extended the cookies on a white plate she had bought at Goodwill.

"Dulcey Major," he said. "Are you better?"

She nodded, looked up. His face was a shock to her. The eyes were red from crying. Blood vessels had broken along his mouth.

"Who died?" she said. She didn't meant to come out like that, but there it was.

"My brother," he said. "Boating accident." His eyes were on hers and they were filling. He seemed as if he would cave right there on the parking lot. She could imagine him going down, his grey-haired head striking the hot tar.

"Shit. Hold on," she said. She put her arm through his and steered him to her rusty Chevy Malibu, swung upon the passenger door, and set him in. He landed on the seat with a thud. She squatted in front of him.

"Doctor Richard Hillman," she said. "You've got a problem."

He laughed and then sobbed and laughed. It scared her to look at that much grief. Later she numbed out on his propensity for tears, couldn't identify, but right then his sadness still felt like a wind coming off him. She got in the driver's seat, told him to close the door, and she drove him out to the lake on the edge of town. While they watched the water ripple sporadically in the breeze and a canoe slice back and forth through it, he talked about his brother, then his mother and father, who had both died the year before.

He missed his flight, got a chance again to examine her rash, which he deemed safe enough for them to make love, which they did and kept on doing for five years, until she got a masters in teaching, which he paid for. When she announced she was ready for marriage and babies, he cried again. While she drove him around town, he told her she had outgrown him and it was time for her to move on, he had done all he could. As if he'd written a final prescription for her. She had felt a desire to hit him, was furious at his money more than his age, because it had overwhelmed her, confused her. In the end she agreed to go, convinced maturity was all about parallels in a relationship, symmetry in age, equal financial footing. Her own time, according to a weeping Rich, had come.

The stroller would not fucking move. It was stuck in the neighbor's perfect, sodden lawn. She shoved and swore under her breath. It was a tank of a stroller, realistic for their budget Joe had said. He bought it without checking with her first, and it made her angry at him every time she turned a corner with it or had to go up a hill. Joe had apologized later, and she had never said another word of complaint, just seethed in a cold, resigned silence. The responsibility of parenting weighed on him too heavily, she knew. It had turned him into the idea of what they both had thought he should be, as it had her, and there was now no more room left between them to wiggle or breathe.

"Hold on," the neighbor said. He was back again and waved at the table of baby clothes, his hand splayed open, as if he were throwing a ball to her. "Take all of it," he said.

"There are no prices," she said, bluntly. "I can't guess what you are asking."

Then she realized, with a shock, she was starting to cry—right there, on a sunny day in April after having survived a winter of all night rain and colicky babies and exhaustion with everything she had thought she wanted. Here, on her own street, she was wailing in front of a man she did not know, but who had seen through her nightgown and watched her dance.

"For free," he said. "Please."

She shook her head. It was an insult, really. She could pay.

He took the stroller handles from her and pushed the girls to two stone benches facing each other over a bird bath. The twins wrenched up to stare at him, the floating wisps of their hair, just coming in, reminded her of frail seedlings. By then she was sobbing so hard he had to maneuver her down to one of those benches.

He settled beside her and waited until she said, "Why are you moving?" which seemed the safer question than what lay beneath those baby clothes. She could not look at that table.

Baba dropped the mitten, and he picked it up and put it on her hand. She tore it off and threw it down again.

"Look kid," he said.

He put it back on her hand, and this time she threw it directly at him.

Dulcey laughed and so did he. He had a loud laugh.

"Seriously," Dulcey asked, sitting up straighter and wiping her nose on her sweater sleeve, "Why are you moving?"

She expected him to say the wife had a new job or the place was too large or they were retiring and going to France or the stock market plummet had cost him too much. What tied them to this little college town anyway?

He took the mitten and spread it evenly on his thigh across the worn fabric of what must have been his favorite pair of jeans. He placed his hand over the mitten. His fingers splayed, warming it.

"Because of you, your kids, all of this," he said, waving his arm at the street, where a group of boys and girls had gathered on their bikes and were yelling mild insults at each other. The spring sun, coming down through the waving oaks in his front yard, flickered over them. They looked caught in an old Technicolor film, neon sweatshirts and handle bars frozen in time. From where Dulcey sat she could see six bungalows, all built up and around this mansion as the town filled in, each one home to at least one child, some three. Children owned the whole neighborhood.

"How about that? I'm moving because of you."

Ducley felt her face go hot while the cold of the bench seeped into her. He got up and went to the woman with the red windbreaker, now gesturing to him over the dining room table. The woman in the navy windbreaker waved to him too. They could be sisters garage saling on a Saturday morning and wearing by habit similar cotton pants and jackets, except their guarded expressions, the way they avoided looking at each other, suggested this might not be a friendly day of suburban second-hand shopping fun. The larger of the two women, the one in blue, stepped up and placed her palm flat down on the table. Cherrywood, Dulcey guessed. That table should be in an antique store. As should the high board, the child's sleigh bed, the pink handmade quilt by the garage, and especially the grandfather clock propped against the white pergola, the sprawling nest of wisteria on it just beginning to leaf out. Rich had taught her about antiques. His house had become so full with his parents' and brother's things he had given Dulcey two Ming vases and a nineteenth century doctor's desk—his father's. She had in turn given the desk to Joe as a wedding present. It was the nicest thing they owned, and because the house was too small it now sat in his office at the university. She rarely saw it.

The woman in red was digging in a huge leather bag for her checkbook. She whispered a price. Dulcey could not hear.

The neighbor (she still didn't know his name!) turned to Dulcey.

"Two hundred dollars?" he mouthed.

Dulcey admired the woman's chutzpa. Her bag cost at least that much. Dulcey shook her head, delicately, so the woman wouldn't see. Ducley stuck out the thumb on her right hand and gestured up. Higher, she mouthed. Much higher.

Miss Navy who had been watching their exchange, called to Dulcey, "I'll give you a grand for the set, another grand for the clock and the sleigh bed, and if you show me what's in the house we could be talking a very big check. Or cash. I can do cash."

"Oh," Dulcey said.

She started to explain that this wasn't her furniture or her house, but her neighbor spoke over her. "My wife is the salesperson," he said. "Whatever she asks is what we'll take." He pointed at Dulcey without looking at her.

"I'll give twelve hundred for the table," the woman with the expensive bag called to Dulcey. She darted forward, then both women surged toward Dulcey.

"Oh, wait," she said.

They swooped across the yard. Ducley could smell the perfume of sun-warmed grass stirred up by their feet. They fluttered down to the bench opposite her, each clutching their purses, each leaning forward in the same predatory fashion. They had the same haircut, although one was dyed blonde and the other brunette. They might, given the shapes of their noses, actually be sisters.

The neighbor came around, took the stroller handles. "I'll be in the house with the kids, Honey," he said. I'll make us lunch. Come in when you're finished here."

And there went her girls, their little trusting heads bobbing, their hands clenching the trays in front of them.

Her neighbor's feet, clad in strange suede shoes only old men wore, dug into the lawn for traction and the stroller surged along. Those shoes were not like anything Joe or any of the men she knew would wear. They would be soft to the touch. It must have taken him years and some bad choices before he had found just the right kind.

Then he was back before her again, his hand flashing out to pick up the fallen mitten, blooming like a red flower on the lawn. He looked up at Dulcey, his face completely open to her, not exactly handsome, but nicely shaped, with large eyes that would never flinch when it came to her, would stay focused on her for as long as it took.

When she nodded he relaxed and gave a slight smile, which she returned. He went back after the girls. He whistled for the dog, who barked once, a hello, from the house. In a while she would follow, go in and pet his dog, sit at the kitchen table, introduce herself and ask his name.

The two bidders waited on her to collect herself, patient in that solicitous way older women who have raised children are with younger mothers. They paused for her to collect herself, get her focus. Dulcey would have very much liked to ask them something she needed a bit more time to verbalize, maybe to tell them the truth—that she was in over her head, had no idea what the neighbor expected to get from this sale. Instead she took a breath, stood up and set out companionably with them across the yard. They stepped

around the heaped tables, surrounded now with shoppers who had found their way to the yard, some looking about for who to pay.

The woman in the red jacket asked the house's age. The woman in the blue jacket asked why Dulcey and her husband would move from such a lovely spot, give up such a splendid place. She told the women that with the economy so bad much was up in the air these days. They nodded in agreement. When they reached the table, Dulcey knew the chatting time was over; they were ready to bargain. She glanced up, took in the bright yellow and white expanse of the house, saw her neighbor filling the sippy cup from the kitchen faucet, his eyes on her. Stroking the dining table's gleaming surface, she told the women she and her husband had loved this table, it had been in the family for years, but it was time for a new one. Then, righting the dining room chairs, she stated her price.